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March 16, Saturday

Defining moments, ephiphanies, satori

Who runs the show?

Eisenhower was seen as an absentee President, nap-taker, vague, delegator (to Dulles, especially), golf-player: except for golf, like Reagan.

The assumption was that Dulles ran foreign policy, keeping Ike (more or less) informed. "Massive retaliation" policy was attributed to Dulles. And Dulles' "Brink of War" article in Life was seen as Dulles asserting his own strategy, policies, proclivities, and predominance in foreign policy. He was seen as a Christian anti-Communist fanatic and risk-taker, unlikely to be reined in adequately by Eisenhower.

Mort Sahl, holding up newspaper and (purportedly) quoting Ike: "'I wouldn't give up John Foster Dulles for the world.'...Well, at least he knows what the stakes are."

This image protected Ike from being blamed for controversial moves or dangers. It was assumed that he didn't know what was being done, and hadn't ordered it. Reagan benefited from this impression in Irangate.

"What did the President know, and when did he forget it?"

But I had weeks of access to the Eyes-Only vault in the State Department. There on shelves were boxes of Eisenhower-Bulganin, Eisenhower-Khrushchev, JFK-Khrushchev letters: all "back-channel," all before the Cuban Missile Crisis, which had been the first revelation of such direct personal communications between the heads of state, letters that had been assumed to be the first such "private" letters.

There were boxes and files of Telcons. There I read telephone conversations between Ball and Stevenson, during and after Cuba II, showing the readiness of officials like Rusk and JFK, as well as the President, to bargain over the Turkish missiles (and Guantanamo?) And discussions of the White House conspiracy to blame Stevenson for weakness in the crisis (i.e., for taking--prematurely? or proposing premature disclosure--positions that Rusk and JFK agreed would have to be adopted eventually).

(Why was there this unusual effort to dump on Stevenson later? To conceal the White House readiness to make similar deals?)

On the Suez crisis, which I was studying in particular in this

vault, I found that contrary to all published studies, including one (Herman --) clearly based on access to some of the classified cables and reports, Ike had controlled decisions relating to the crisis throughout.

In particular, Herman -- , like others, attributed the crucial decision to refuse US funding to the Aswan Dam--which led Nasser to nationalize the Suez Canal--to an impulsive response by Dulles to the word from the Egyptian Ambassador that Nasser might seek funding from the Russians. (See what Townsend Hoopes says about this, in The Devil and John Foster Dulles).

The eyes-only files showed that there had been urgent discussions and memos about this in the days leading up to this meeting, including the day before and that very morning. And Ike had been kept in touch almost hourly. My memory is that he was called by Dulles that very morning while he was playing golf at Burning Tree (a radiophone accompanied him on the links!) and had given Dulles explicit instructions as to what to do. The situation was not unforeseen, the response was not impulsive but considered and official, and the decision was by Dulles but by the President.

This was a revelation to me of: 1) Ike's control, contrary to the public and scholarly image; 2) the relation of Dulles to Ike, and Ike's deliberate cultivation of a contrary image (with Dulles' collaboration, no doubt enthusiastic, in the impression that he, rather than Ike, ran policy); 3) how misled even "well-informed" accounts, with access to classified material, by a former Insider, could be. (This last, I ran into over and over in my crisis study, as by comparing the various CIA studies, by Bud Southard, and others).

2. When the U-2 was shot down, and the initial government lie about it was exposed by Khrushchev (imprudently: he deliberately humiliated the US Government and Ike, without apparently foreseeing the conferences; just as he did with the Cuban missiles. In both cases, the US President retaliated by humiliating him (back): though again, at least in the case of Ike, without fully foreseeing the reaction he would evoke. (Khrushchev walked out of the Paris Summit: giving up the chance for Ike to make concessions on Berlin!)

In both cases, Khrushchev was responding to real humiliations by the US government: first, by sending U-2s over Russia (though, secretly, i.e., not publicly: i.e., secret from the US public, and Su public and allies); then, by putting missiles in Turkey, and by the Gilpatric speech (which I wrote!)

Thus, these are all examples of my theory of the Fait Malaccompli: a cycle of secrecy and deceit, humiliation and rage and threats of violence. (In the U-2 case as in Cuba II, SAC was put on alert!)

A crucial step in the breakup of the Summit was that Ike came to take public responsibility for the flight of the U-2 just before the Summit, and to say that he would continue the flights. Ironically, it was widely believed that this position, insulting to Khrushchev, creating a personal confrontation, was a lie. Most commentators assumed that Ike had not been involved in the details of the program and had probably not even known of the provocative timing of this particular flight.

They believed that his assertion to the contrary, costly as it was, and false! was made simply to avoid confirming the true situation of his own ignorance, passivity, and lack of control of operations in his own Administration. Khrushchev himself believed this, as he says in his memoirs.

What was the truth? In order to learn this, though with some predisposition to believe the version commonly assumed, I interviewed Richard Bissell, who had started and managed the U-2 program.

He could not have been more emphatic. The President had not only been briefed on every aspect of the program, including the proposed program of flights, but Bissell had gone over the flight program of each individual flight beforehand with Ike personally, usually for several hours.

Bissell said: Not only did he personally question Bissell on every aspect of the flight, what would be covered, what routes would be followed, what information was sought, what the rationale and need for the flight was, but "in every single case he personally modified the flight plan, affecting the route and the targets to be covered."

Thus, Ike had personally approved the timing of the flight just before the Summit, despite its obvious risks. (Likewise, Bissell remarked, JFK had wanted to control every aspect of US operations in support of Bissell's later project, the Bay of Pigs. He referred to a recent crisis--was it Tonkin Gulf, 34A ops, or was it something else in the spring of 64? It must have been something else, because I don't think I saw him after I joined the DOD in August 1964, but earlier--"I know from my own experience that the President was probably demanding hourly reports of the ship's commander and trying to control every step he took." This might have been a reference to Navy operations in the Cuban Missile Crisis, which after all I was studying intensely at the time).

Again, this was in great contrast to both journalistic and scholarly accounts of the U-2 crisis, and Ike's role as President. So much so, that when Ike felt compelled to state publicly the truth about his role, knowledge of, and responsibility for this action, which had disastrous effects--when he abandoned "plausible denial" (thoroughly plausible in this case!)--he was simply not

believed by the public or observers, or Khrushchev! (People found denial more plausible than the truth!)

The issue is, how to understand the origin and the nature of risks in the nuclear era, so as to reduce them. To believe that "the problem" is military recklessness, ignorance and insubordination, is to seriously misdirect concern and sense of how to reduce the risks. It is to believe that simply tighter Presidential control--the Neustadt solution to all problems--is the best and only way to deal with the problem: when this approach could actually make the problem worse (given the fact that the military are often more conservative than the Executive officials).

Ike, LeMay and civilian authority: Who's in charge?

I referred to both these examples in my discussion last night with Paul Leshmar of the BBC, who did a film report on LeMay's provocative reconnaissance missions over the SU in the early 50s, which he believes went well beyond what Ike knew or would have authorized.

(Thus, he sees the risks of nuclear war in the 50s as being greater than the public knew, and always greater than Ike knew. But he sees these risks mostly in terms of what LeMay was doing, secretly from the President, whereas I, in light of my own experience and study, would emphasize the risks of what the President was consciously authorizing. The risks of LeMay's unauthorized initiatives were additional to these Presidential risks.

Among the Presidential risks consciously assumed was Ike's decision to keep LeMay as head of SAC, and later as Vice Chief of the Air Force. He knew perfectly LeMay's inclinations, anti-Communism, belief in preventive war and readiness to see nuclear war (a US first strike) emerge as "provoked" by SU actions, which he was happy to provoke by his own actions. Yet, just like JFK who was equally well aware of LeMay's proclivities, he kept LeMay in and promoted him.

In part, for both Ike and JFK, this reflected other priorities, competing with and higher than, concern about the dangers of nuclear war this posed. Running an efficient SAC; threatening the Soviets; relations with Congressional hawks (especially for JFK, just after the Bay of Pigs, and after Cuba II: better to have LeMay in than on the outside, working with Goldwater and later Wallace: the same calculation Johnson made).

But it also reflected their awareness, along with LeMay's own awareness, that the risks weren't as great as they would have been if the Soviets had lived up to their own boasts and the Administration's and Congress' warnings of their parity or superiority. If the Soviets had done such things to us, running recon flights over our territory, it would have been as dangerous for them and for the world as if Castro had done it. Likewise, if the Soviets had really had nuclear parity in the 50s or early 60s, LeMay's actions would have been highly dangerous. Ike wouldn't have let him do them. He would not have had a LeMay in position at all.

Thus, the fact that he did choose LeMay meant that the President was taking such risks as did exist, reflecting his awareness that the Soviets, being so much weaker both in forces and in alertness and vulnerability, were very unlikely to respond forcefully.

That isn't to say there was no risk of Soviet response, nor that both LeMay and the President may have underestimated this. Thus, LeMay may have underestimated the (high) risk of Chinese intervention in Vietnam if the US acted as strongly against North Vietnam as LeMay and the JCS wanted. (LBJ was probably not wrong about this, according to the Hershberg studies). Likewise, LeMay and the JCS probably underestimated the danger of Soviet response to US attack on Cuba. In both cases, the President was probably closer to the mark, even though they may have erred somewhat in the opposite direction, overestimating the certainty of Communist response. (The cases of Laos in 1961, and the Taiwan Straits in 1958--which is in the news today, as a precedent for the current Chinese exercise crisis--are also relevant here).

If the President had known exactly what LeMay was doing, what would he have done? My guess is he would have reined him in, told him to stop, to cool it. But he wouldn't have fired him. Leshmar said, "If LeMay had nuked Rangel Island, he would have fired him."

I said: "But that idea is just out of the ball park, as to what LeMay might have done. It shouldn't even be mentioned in the same breath, as sending a recon plane over."

I said: "Another major reason why Ike and JFK kept and promoted LeMay was that he was seen as controllable, as a good soldier, loyal and obedient to his bosses. He would test the envelope, press on the edges, like any aggressive subordinate with initiative, but he was no MacArthur, who couldn't be controlled."

As usual, the Presidents may have been exaggerating their degree of control, their ability to control events. LeMay was more dangerous than they realized; that was why I was appalled at JFK's promoting him to be Chief. But ultimately, you didn't have to worry that he would consciously and deliberately launch an attack without authorization, e.g., after Cuba II.

(What if Kennedy had known what LeMay, Kegan and Power were doing in the Cuba II, in the way of alert probes--recall the flight over Kamchatka of a SAC U-2! never fully explained, with Migs launched in response--and messages in the clear? As with the Navy and its forcing SU subs to the surface!

The situation between Khrushchev and Castro was very parallel. Castro was far from fully under control; his antiaircraft firing was in defiance of Khrushchev. Yet it was Khrushchev who had given him the AA guns, and probably trained his operators, and who had put SSMs in his territory. And K who kept the crisis going long enough for Castro to fire. And the Soviet generals, apparently with K's approval, who put nuclear warheads in Cuba, both strategic and tactical, and delegated authority to use the tactical warheads!

It was the games that the heads of state were playing, their

desires to intimidate their opponents, that led to their giving men like LeMay and Castro such capabilities. These are the fundamental risks created in the nuclear era. The ways in which such subordinates exceeded their authority or the desires of their patrons simply increased risks, it didn't create them.

My earlier comment to Leshmar was that I had seen LeMay, along with Teller, as a "Channel for Evil" into the world. ("I don't believe in a Devil, or in forces of evil; but if I did, I would see LeMay and Teller as channels for evil.")

But on reflection, I realize that this reflected my earlier belief that the firebombing of Tokyo had been purely a LeMay initiative, changing the ethics of US strategic operations decisively and permanently away from Just War constraints toward the free use of terrorism, leading directly and pretty inevitably to the use of the A-bombs and to later nuclear planning.

More recent data has all indicated that the real pressure for this came from Hap Arnold and Lauris Norstad. Hansell was already being pressed to do this, and when he resisted, he was replaced by LeMay (who had been impressed by the precedent of Berlin and especially Dresden, both earlier than Tokyo).

I now think that in Tokyo he was merely carrying out the wishes of his superiors (who were concerned to increase the sortie rate over Japan, despite bad weather, and who wanted to show "results" and a major Air Force role in subduing Japan, for postwar budget battles). Having "succeeded" over Tokyo and the 63 other cities, he naturally championed this method of winning wars from then on. Why should he have had "moral qualms"? [PL noted his lack of these] No one else did!

I suspect now that LeMay's "bloodthirstiness" and views were different from what any other Air Force general who had had his experience and role would have been: anyone else who had ended the war (only he didn't!) by burning down Tokyo, 63 other cities, and then Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Two "epiphanies" I related to Leshmar:

1. In August of 1961 I went to SAC Headquarters in Omaha to find out the SAC reaction to the guidance that Col. Robert Lukeman and I had drafted for McNamara to send to General Power. It directed Power to find ways to adapt current planning and operations as soon as possible to the new guidance I had drafted on the plans and options, which was not scheduled for full implementation until the next year.

I talked to Colonel Dave Leibman, now chief of War Plans for SAC, who I had earlier known well and worked with when he worked under General Glen Kent in the Air Force Plans Division (Policy and Plans? Long-range Plans?), along with Lukeman, Ernie Cragg, Russ Dougherty (who later became Commander of SAC).

Leibman said my guidance had been received, after some initial reserve, with approval. "We can work with this." (Referring, I think, to the SecDef Guidance and the options, not to the latest directive: though this may be mistaken, he may have been referring to the directive).

The Berlin Crisis was in full swing at this moment, and Leibman mentioned that the JCS, at the urging of General Power of SAC, had sent an official memorandum to the President assuring him that "if worst came to worst" and it was necessary to execute the plan for general war (i.e., in a US first strike, not out of the blue but as an escalation of conflict in Europe, perhaps over the Berlin Corridor) casualties in the US, though tragic, would be limited to ten million.

I said: "Ten million?! That's the population of metropolitan New York! A single large warhead on New York or LA could give you that!"

Nevertheless, Dave said, that is what the JCS had told the President. They were trying to stiffen his resolve in the Berlin Crisis. (Obviously, they were not including casualties in West Europe, although the Soviets had hundreds of medium-range and intermediate range missiles within range of Europe, along with medium bombers).

Later in the conversation in his office we were discussing the June estimate of Soviet missiles. This was the last "missile gap" estimate. The estimate of what they had currently was lower than had earlier been estimated for 1961, but it was still several times greater than the 40 Atlas and Titan missiles the US had operational. I believe the number in the text (the main, consensus view, including CIA) was 120 ICBMs. For once, the State Department's Intelligence and Research Director was higher than the

"community" estimate of current Soviet deployment. He took a footnote to estimate something like 160 missiles at that time. Except for the Army and Navy, which continued to take a footnote maintaining that the Soviets had deployed only "a few" missiles, the others all agreed that in the future Soviet deployments would be huge and the "gap" over US programs very large, with thousands of Soviet ICBMs by the late Sixties.

Leibman asked me: "Do you know what the Old Man believes they have now?"

"Tell me."

"One thousand."

"Deployed? Right now?"

"Yes."

I thought back to what he had said about the consequences of a US first strike, and I asked him, "Do you think you can locate all of them exactly right now?"

"No, not yet."

"How many does SAC think it can locate now?"

"About two hundred."

"Well, that leaves eight hundred ICBMs you can't find now. 800 ICBMs left standing after you've conducted your best first strike. And you're telling the President that there would be only ten million US fatalities after a US first strike..."

"Do those two estimates really match up? Isn't there something wrong about one of them?"

Leibman narrowed his eyes and scrunched his mouth. He nodded. "You know, that's a very interesting question. I don't think I've ever heard it raised before."

He thought for a while more, then he said, "There's someone I'd like to hear you put that question to. I'd like to hear how he answers it."

He took me down into the underground bowels of the SAC Headquarters and introduced me to a general who was Deputy Commander of SAC for Intelligence, a man I had heard described as "a real intellectual" (he had a Ph. D. in political science, as I recall) and "the father of the missile gap" (one of several rivals for that honor).

Leibman told the general, who was accompanied by a couple of colonels, that I had just raised quite an interesting question, which he asked me to repeat. I did. The general didn't answer it. Instead he reacted almost exactly the way Leibman had. He nodded soberly and said, "That is an interesting question. Hmnn..."

After a short silence I said, "You know, if you're trying to encourage the President to take a strong stand with the Russians over Berlin, it might not serve your purpose to tell him he's facing a thousand Soviet missiles."

The general sat up sharply at this and looked almost incredulously at me. "You're not suggesting, are you, that we should fudge our estimates?"

He looked piercingly at me and I looked piercingly back at him, searching his face for irony and not finding any. He seemed totally unselfconscious of the widespread fame of Air Force estimators, SAC above all, for blowing smoke. But this was not, it seemed, the moment to share a smile about this.

I said: "Certainly not. Of course not. ('Heavens no,' I wanted to say). But...if there should be a range of uncertainty it might not be best from every point of view to emphasize only the upper end of that range."

Shortly Leibman led me away.